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Clients See Improvements in Nebraska's SNAP Program Federal Report Confirms Progress

Lincoln – Putting the needs of clients first and foremost is driving improvements to the state's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called food stamps), said Courtney Phillips, CEO of the Department of Health and Human Services.

That's the focus of the federal government, as well, which is concerned with the length of time it takes clients to receive benefits after they apply.

Phillips said the state's goal is to see direct improvements for clients.

The Tiangwa family applied for SNAP benefits last week. While Ms. Tiangwa has a full time job, she found her family in need. She applied for SNAP benefits and they were approved and processed the following day.

"This is really important for me and my family," said Tiangwa. "I'm so thankful and grateful for the help."

Organizations that help clients apply for services, like the Food Bank for the Heartland in Omaha, are seeing a difference, too.

"For the clients that we serve, we see a much higher approval rating in an expedited fashion due to changes made within the Department of Health and Human Services," according to Ericka Smrcka, director of programs for the Food Bank for the Heartland in Omaha. "The Department has obviously worked hard on process improvements and all of that hard work is paying off."

This experience is supported by a recent report from the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, the federal agency that oversees the SNAP program.

The report, which covers cases processed between October 2014 and March 2015, shows that Nebraska moved from 48th in the nation to 39th for timeliness in processing.

"We have more progress to make, but this improvement is encouraging because it means Nebraskans are receiving the SNAP benefits in a more timely way," said Phillips. "This puts food on their tables. Our team is making an effort to put the needs of clients first."

Nebraska's rate of timely processing applications was 88.68 percent; the national average was 91.04 percent. The report includes a margin of error of plus or minus 6.03 percent for Nebraska, making the high end of the state's scale at 94.71 percent. According FNS integrity branch chief Joe Casey, FNS will continue to monitor states like Nebraska with a rate between 90 and 95 percent. States with rates lower than 90 percent must file a corrective action plan.

The reduced time to process applications has not compromised the SNAP accuracy rate. The most recent accuracy report for the same time period showed the rate was 98.15 percent compared to 96.78 percent during the same period last year.

Neither report includes changes from this past April through July, during which additional improvements have been made.

Besides the hard work of staff and their focus on clients, Phillips also attributed the improvements to a consultant hired by FNS to provide counsel to Nebraska, the positive working relationship with the regional FNS office, and support from Governor Pete Ricketts.

In recent months daily and weekly meetings have been led by Felix Davidson, Governor Pete Ricketts' chief operating officer. The weekly meetings involve a cross-section of disciplines in DHHS to jointly search for solutions. Daily meetings with Economic Assistance staff, who oversee the part of ACCESSNebraska that deals with SNAP and other public assistance programs, have kept the team's focus on making adjustments in response to changing, daily needs.

"The DHHS team has been working exceptionally hard on applying targeted process improvements," he said. "Their efforts are translating into improved results, which is encouraging to see."

Davidson lauded one change that has speeded responsiveness to clients, that of collecting the first mail of the day at 2 a.m. instead of 8 a.m. Workers at the Omaha Document Imaging Center then scan and place documents in clients' online files. When Customer Service Center staff arrive at 8 a.m., documents received that day are ready for processing and customer calls. The process that previously took an average of two days was reduced to six hours with the earlier mail pick up and start times.

"People will continue to need our assistance," she said. "It's our responsibility to do our best to provide services that meet those needs in a timely and efficient way."

Monthly updates on the performance of ACCESSNebraska, including SNAP, are available on the DHHS website: www.dhhs.ne.gov